

A festa teatrale sacra and the azioni sacre

By the time Metastasio finally returned to Rome in 1727, the term “oratorio” was not only firmly entrenched in common parlance as is clear from its multiple appearances in the poet’s correspondence, but the genre itself had also spread from the oratories into the private palaces of the Roman nobility. Thus, Metastasio’s first oratorio, *Per la festività del Santo Natale* (q.v.), commissioned by Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni for performance in his private theatre at the Palace of the Papal Chancellery was no particular exception. Apart from the obvious change in focus from secular to sacred issues, the most striking difference between *La festività* and the Neapolitan *serenate* is a change from a linear plot involving pastoral or mythical characters to one involving philosophical justification and discussion as expressed by allegorical figures representative of orthodox Christian belief. Performance by distinguished singers within an elaborate stage setting before a select audience, and even a final encomium, remained as a matter of course. The association of the term *sacro componimento drammatico* with *La festività* in the Hérissant edition can only be viewed as an example of a generalization, and any grouping of this work with Metastasio’s seven oratorios written for Vienna as an *azione teatrale sacra* fails to recognize its distinctive characteristics. With its closer alignment with the *serenata / festa teatrale*, it may well be distinguished as a *festa teatrale sacra*.

By identifying each of his seven Viennese oratorios as an *azioni sacre*, Metastasio simply carried forward a nomenclature particularly established by his immediate predecessor, Apostolo Zeno. Typically, the term indicated an oratorio set out in two parts based upon biblical accounts from either the old or new testaments or, in the case of *Sant’Elena al Calvario*, upon hagiographic sources.
